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Ruby Aguirre
Humboldt State University

Katelyn Harris
Humboldt State University

Molly Rose Hilgenberg
Humboldt State University

Melody Soper
Humboldt State University

Pamela H. Bowers
Humboldt State University

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Sex Trafficking and Rural Communities: A Review of the Literature

Ruby Aguirre, Katelyn Harris, Molly Rose Hilgenberg, Melody Soper, and Pamela H. Bowers
Humboldt State University

Abstract: Sex trafficking is a pervasive threat across the globe and all fifty states of the United States, especially for underage female youth. However, there is a dearth of literature and awareness in domestic rural areas. Sex trafficking is a form of human trafficking that threatens all communities, including rural areas. This extended literature review looks closely at recent studies, and the grey literature to garner a better understanding of the implications for rural social work practice. The review concludes with recommendations and implications for future research, policy, and practice.

Keywords: Sex trafficking, female underage youth, Native American youth, rural social work

Introduction

Sex trafficking is one of the most damaging forms of human trafficking, and can also be described as modern-day slavery. The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (VTVPA) of 2000 defines sex trafficking of a minor as: “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act...” and “...in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age” (18 U.S.C. § 1591). Most people think of sex trafficking to be an issue that only affects individuals or communities outside of the United States, especially countries that are underdeveloped (Kotrla, 2010). People who are slightly more informed may regard sex trafficking only as a problem that impacts urban areas. However, sex trafficking is a domestic threat to vulnerable populations in all fifty states including rural areas. This review of the literature will use the term sex trafficking in place of child prostitution. Outdated material uses inappropriate terminology including child prostitution, which only adds blame and shame to the children and adolescents who are victims of being sold for sexual slavery. Unlike weapons or drug trafficking, a human can be reused multiple times per day for years as a sex trafficking victim, creating a limitless source of profit for traffickers (Marcus, Sanson, Horning, Thompson, & Curtis, 2016).

Awareness of sex trafficking is important to the field of social work given the risk factors for youth who have a history of being involved in the child welfare system, and those who have experienced homelessness and/or physical, sexual or emotional abuse. While sex trafficking in the United States has become a more familiar topic for social workers (Kotrla, 2010), the issue is often discussed and documented in the context of urban practice. The field of rural social work needs to know how to identify, prevent, and intervene for those youth who are at-risk or showing signs of being trafficked. This topic was selected given the dearth of literature for domestic rural communities about the threat of sex trafficking. Often rural areas are reduced to the paternalistic view as idyllic, which can damage the ability to spread awareness to its citizens about the pervasive threat of sex trafficking for at-risk youth (Cole & Sprang, 2014; Edwards, Torgerson & Sattem, 2009). In this review of the literature, the authors address the following themes found:

risk factors for domestic victims, how to identify victims and what to do to intervene, how this connects to Native youth and Tribes residing in rural areas, prevention strategies, and what sex trafficking looks like in a rural community. The review closes with gaps, recommendations, and implications. Youth who are at highest risk of recruitment into sex trafficking are young females, some males, non-binary gender youth, and those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ). For the purpose of this review, the focus will be on female underage youth with high risk factors. In addition, this manuscript will also delve particularly into Native American female youth, as they are disproportionately affected and at risk for being sex trafficked.

Literature Review

Risk Factors for Domestic Victims

Estimates of youth sex trafficking victims have been documented as unreliable, however statistics range from 200,000 to 3 million youth per year domestically (Horning, 2013; Estes & Weiner, 2002). Young females, under the age of 18 are documented in the literature as having the highest risk for recruitment into sex trafficking (Horning, 2013). Additionally, males and non-binary gender youth are also at great risk (McLain & Garrity, 2011). Studies report that the risk factors for the exploitation of youth in domestic sex trafficking are most often girls who experience involvement with child welfare, running away, drug addiction, identifying as LGBTQ, experiencing homelessness, a history of physical or sexual abuse, isolation and poverty (O'Brien, White, & Rizo, 2017; McClain & Garrity, 2011). In addition to these risk factors, being Native American and living in a rural area where there is a weakened law enforcement jurisdiction between states and sovereign nations increases the likelihood that a girl will be at risk for being coerced into sex trafficking (Greer, 2013). In their study of cases of sex trafficked minors identified through the U.S. Department of Justice website and media reports over a nine-year period, Kotrla & Wommack (2011) found that the victims were, on average, 15-year-old females who had been lured from home by a person through false promises, leading to exploitative prostitution. This finding supports the assertion in the study of adjudicated female juveniles in a rural state by Perkins and Ruiz (2016) which found most of the females, had a strong desire to feel loved before their entrance to sexually exploitive situations. The rural research by Perkins and Ruiz (2016), indicated that being homeless or in the foster care system were risk factors for being trafficked. Familial problems play a role in minors' vulnerability into sex trafficking and it is possible this applies more so to youth living in rural areas. The home lives of some victims studied were characterized as dysfunctional, with histories of physical, sexual and/or drug abuse transpiring (Perkins & Ruiz, 2016, McClain & Garrity, 2011). LGBTQ youth are also at high risk as they face familial rejection during the coming out process to their families, and are likely to be thrown out of the house or runaway, leading to a higher rate of these youth living on the streets (McLain & Garrity, 2011). Additionally, youth who run away from home, foster care or residential living facilities are now estimated to be 1 in 6 of sex trafficking victims (Polaris Project, n.d.). A lack of supervision and mentorship for at-risk youth are seen as easy targets for recruitment by sex traffickers, thus these vulnerable adolescents are at the highest risk of exploitation and imprisonment in sexual slavery.

How to Identify and Intervene with Sex Trafficking Victims

It is crucial for medical and social services professionals to learn how to identify victims of sex trafficking in order to intervene appropriately. Considering the risk factors discussed above, it is essential for medical and social service professionals to be educated on the high rates of sex trafficking among these vulnerable youth populations. Nurses have been identified as one of the most important professionals who may encounter a victim of sex trafficking, because the physicians have less time to interact with their patients (McClain & Garrity, 2011). An adolescent who is frequently coming in for pregnancy or abortions, contraception, STD treatment are all immediate signs of being sex trafficked. Additionally, signs of violence or psychological trauma, having pimp tattoos like crowns or names, or if they are accompanied by an older male are warning signs that should alert the nurse or other professional that the patient is potentially being trafficked (McClain & Garrity, 2011).

The chances are likely that medical and social service professionals will see a victim of sex trafficking; estimates from 30-88 percent of U.S. trafficking victims see a healthcare professional at least once during their imprisonment (Davis, 2017). It is crucial to learn the intervention techniques recommended by researchers once a victim is potentially identified. Earning trust with the patient and getting them alone in the room is essential (McClain & Garrity, 2011). Questions for the patient regarding attending school, living conditions, access to basic needs, as well as direct questions about forced sexual acts are essential.

Native American Youth and Tribes

Life on the reservation for American Indians may be rough; many reservations across the United States suffer from poverty, violence, and drug dependency. Crime rates on some reservations are five times those of the national average (Regan, 2011). Between 2009 and 2014 crime rates significantly increased on some reservations, creating more barriers for young women growing up on the reservation. Sweet (2015) reported that many women turned to prostitution in order to make income out of desperation. Often, the forced sexual exploitation young women experience is done by a family member or someone close to them. Other women sell their young daughters in exchange for drugs or money. 50 to 80 percent of the identified victims have been involved with the child welfare system at some point in their lives (Sweet, 2015). With poverty and violence taking hold of reservations, victims of sex trafficking may not view themselves as victims of sexual violence because they see it as a normal part of life (Deer, 2010). Similarly, Koeplinger (2008) noted that lack of education, lack of employment opportunities, social normalization of violence against women, and high rates of poverty, for example, are just some of the environmental factors on reservations that may lead to vulnerability to predators.

While little data has been recorded on human trafficking related to Tribes and Tribal land, a review of community impact data indicate that half the women interviewed met the definition of human trafficking and disproportionate impact of commercial sex trade in Indigenous communities in the U.S. and Canada (Regan, 2011). In Minnesota, 25 percent of women arrested for commercial sex trade identified as Native American while only accounting for 2.2 percent of the total population (Sweet, 2015). In Alaska, 33 percent of Native women were arrested for commercial sex trade while only 7.9 percent make up the total population in Anchorage, Alaska (Sweet, 2015). There is a strong connection that exists between the history of

colonization and the current persistence of targeting native people for prostitution. In the U.S. both racialized fetishes and sexual fetishes fuel the market in which mostly white men purchase commercial sex with people of color, including minors (Butler, 2015). In a study conducted in 2015, 75 percent of Native women interviewed had disclosed they sold sex in exchange for shelter, food, or drugs (Butler, 2015). Many women living on a reservation may not see other alternatives to employment. In Minnesota, of the women interviewed, prostitution was described as a way of monetary means for them. Young women in particular have been stripped of their culture, land, and means of economic survival, thus, according to Regan (2011) prostitution and sex trade has been a way they perceive to make it out of poverty.

O'Brien and colleagues (2017) found a strong correlation between foster youth and domestic sex trafficking. Many American Indian and Alaska Native youth are likely to be in the child welfare system thus making them vulnerable to domestic sex trafficking (Sweet, 2014). A disadvantage that many Native American youth face living on the reservation is that they do not have the protection of state or regional law enforcement, and if a state is a Public Law 280 state, county law enforcement is unreliable. Additionally, tribal police are overworked and underpaid, adding to the vulnerability of Native American women (Regan, 2011).

Prevention

Identifying strategies to help counteract the rising risk of youth being sex-trafficked is significantly needed, particularly in rural areas. The United Nations uses the three P's, *prevention* (of sex trafficking), *protection* (of victims of sex trafficking), and *prosecution* (of the offenders of sex trafficking) (Samarasinghe & Burton, 2007). These three P's are the basis of the United Nations anti-trafficking laws (Samarasinghe & Burton, 2007). Samarasinghe and Burton (2007) define prevention as the "preemptive intervention *before* any of the forms of trafficking identified in the UN Protocol occur" (p.53). Samarasinghe and Burton (2007) also note that awareness is the most important prevention strategy available. Both rural and urban communities have experienced lack of awareness on the way traffickers recruit victims (Birge, 2015; Samarasinghe & Burton, 2007). According to Reid (2012), the most effective prevention strategy is to focus primarily on strained families and the children previously identified in the risk factor section. Specifically, Reid (2012) proposes that the skills of law enforcement and child protective services could help decrease the risk of a young girls being further victimized in child sex trafficking by providing support to the young girls and their caregivers. This can include adequate mental health interventions such as, family counseling, multisystemic, functional family, and trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy that involves both individual and family services (Reid, 2012).

Additional prevention strategies noted in the literature are to provide better training for all child protective professionals, law enforcement professionals, and healthcare providers (Deshpande & Nour, 2013). Specifically, recommendations for child protective professionals include a need to reduce caseloads in order to improve response time (Reid, 2012). Reid highlights an initiative called the Safe Place, which provides personal safety plans for youth to identify safe places if their caregiver is no longer an option (Reid, 2012).

Laws and policies are also important steps in preventing further exploitations of youth. However, existing laws have not always been effective in protecting the victims of sex trafficking. Sex trafficking victims, including children, who have been criminally exploited are still being prosecuted by the laws that were designed to protect them (Reid, 2012). According to Yen (2008), before 2000 in the United States prosecutors were forced to laboriously build cases against traffickers using a combination of federal statutes. The lack of laws about sex trafficking caused a plan to instate a comprehensive anti-trafficking statute. In October of 2000 the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) was signed into law. There were three ways this law worked: 1) prevention of trafficking, 2) prosecution of traffickers, and 3) protection of victims (Yen, 2008). This act also allowed the “President to carry out initiatives to stimulate economic and educational opportunities for foreign girls and women living in impoverished communities” (Yen, 2008, p. 663). However, there were several critiques that needed to be done to this act, because the chance of traffickers actually being found and prosecuted was low compared to the magnitude of the problem (Yen, 2008). It took three different bills to finally address all the issues that victims of sex trafficking experienced and what they needed to feel protected. The legislative breakthrough that occurred was the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) of 2005. This was the first time that Congress addressed the critical factor of demand for sex trafficking (Yen, 2008). The TVPRA 2005 allowed a \$50 million grant that would give local law enforcement and social services agencies an opportunity to develop programs that would target reducing the male demand, as well as investigate and prosecute buyers of commercial sex (Yen, 2008). The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 is the most recent act addressing sex trafficking and youth. This act is designed to reduce the incidence of sex trafficking among youth within the foster care system. The part of the law that pertains to sex trafficking requires child welfare systems to develop a better strategy to respond to sex trafficking by screening and identifying youth who are victims or at risk for sex trafficking. They must also provide services that are appropriate to youth who have experienced sex trafficking while reporting any missing children to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, as well as develop their own protocols for locating missing children and/or runaways and determine what circumstances they faced while away from care (humantraffickinghotline.org, 2016).

Sex Trafficking in a Rural Community

There is a dearth of literature exploring sex trafficking in relation to risk factors, prevention, intervention, and Native American women in domestic rural communities. The literature that was found highlighted the limited research offered on sex trafficking in non-metropolitan locations (Cole & Sprang, 2014). The research that is available regarding rural communities was commonly found to be studies completed with small sample sizes in Midwest and Southern states (Cole & Sprang, 2014; Perkins & Ruiz, 2016; Williamson & Prior, 2009). The literature reviewed offered data and discussion surrounding the challenges of addressing sex trafficking in a rural community, with much less focus on any possible strengths. Rural challenges were revealed as areas of recruitment of youth by sex traffickers, access to community resources and a lack of public and professional awareness of sex trafficking as a rural issue.

Sex trafficking does occur in rural areas but is possibly overlooked by community members because they view rural towns as quaint, idyllic places, causing blindness to many social problems (Edwards, Torgerson & Sattem, 2009). People often do not realize what occurs in their neighborhoods. Recruitment of youth by sex traffickers happens in many places in a rural community including on the street, at corner stores, in shopping malls, at a friend's house, outside of juvenile detention centers, and in the youth's own home (Williamson & Prior, 2009). The internet was also found to be a significant factor in facilitating trafficking activities (Cole & Sprang, 2014) but the extent to which is unknown and requires more research to be conducted. Most youth in rural areas were found to be trafficked by a family member, someone they knew or someone from the neighborhood who knew of them (Perkins & Ruiz, 2016; Cole & Sprang, 2014; Williamson & Prior, 2009). The smaller populations of rural communities increase the likelihood of familiarity between the citizens. One possible strength of a rural community was found to be the existence of close-knit networks that could more quickly spread the news of a youth's adverse situation, potentially increasing the youth's chances of gaining assistance (Edwards, Torgerson, & Sattem, 2009). Getting help for a youth who is being sex trafficked can be challenging, especially when social services are limited and there is a lack of general awareness around the who, what, when, where, and how of sex trafficking.

The limited number of organizations, social workers and other relevant professionals has put rural areas at a disadvantage for preventing or intervening in sex trafficking cases. Professionals in rural and non-rural communities see sex trafficking as less of a serious issue in rural areas (Cole & Sprang, 2014). Rural settings often have less funding, fewer areas of specialization and greater barriers to services, including having limited transportation options while the majority of services are located in the largest town, which may be far from other areas in the community (Edwards, Torgerson, & Sattem, 2009). In a study on service professionals' knowledge of human trafficking, the respondents from rural areas commonly reported there was no sex trafficking occurring in their community and stated human trafficking was an issue for larger cities (Newton, Mulcahy & Martin, 2008). These findings are consistent with other research showing that professionals, including medical staff, law enforcement officers and social workers, in rural communities who provide services to youth who are currently, have been, or are at-risk of being victims of sex trafficking, were found to have less knowledge of state and federal laws relating to human trafficking and had received less training on human and sex trafficking than their metropolitan counterparts (Cole & Sprang, 2014). Lack of resources, knowledge and general awareness of sex trafficking make preventing, intervening and supporting sex trafficked youth more difficult and allows sex trafficking to continue to occur at high rates within the United States and around the world.

Conclusion

The contributions of the literature that was reviewed provide in-depth insight into the complex issue of domestic sex trafficking and the impacts it has on some of our most vulnerable young people. The strengths that currently exist are in the specific work for healthcare professionals and identifying vulnerable populations (McClain & Garrity, 2011; Cole & Sprang, 2015; Davis, 2017; Deshpande & Nour, 2013), in addition to the strategic outline for federal and state laws to reduce male demand through awareness and prevention strategies (Yen, 2008). The weaknesses identified revealed that there are still gaps that require more research and awareness

of the issue. Most importantly, research on sex trafficking on the internet, in rural areas and especially prevention for Native American youth and other vulnerable populations will be essential for social workers working in rural areas. Consistent statistics of current underage victims of sex trafficking would be helpful, in addition to research on effective awareness and prevention trainings for law enforcement, health and human service workers, and other direct service professionals working in rural areas. Finally, there are gaps in consistent community awareness campaigns in rural areas that could help contribute to increased knowledge of the frequent recruitment of vulnerable populations.

Recommendations

The gaps found in the literature have led to the following recommendations:

1. Further Research

The research in the literature indicates sex trafficking occurs in rural communities but the extent is unclear. It is difficult to completely track the number of sex trafficking cases given the underground culture of the crime and with the limited research available; but, with more in-depth research in rural areas across the United States, the picture would become clearer. Many of the studies looking at rural communities comprised of small sample sizes in Midwest or Southern states (Cole & Sprang, 2014; Perkins & Ruiz, 2016; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Location specific studies do not represent the of whole the country and it is uncertain if they are reflective of what occurs in other rural communities. Further research should be conducted within rural areas encompassing all regions of the country to provide a more comprehensive look at the problem of sex trafficking and ascertain any consistent statistics representing the entire national population. There is also a need for more research to be conducted in and around Native American reservations as Native American women were found to be highly vulnerable to sex trafficking (Greer, 2015).

The internet was found to play a role in facilitating sex trafficking activities (Cole and Sprang, 2014) but the extent to which remains unknown. The nature of the internet often changes and grows quickly. Research would help determine the extent to which the internet is a problem in aiding sex trafficking as well as creating exit strategies, and how to best create policy to limit the buying and selling of children through the internet.

2. Trainings for Professionals

The literature revealed that rural professionals who come into contact with youth have less knowledge of human trafficking laws and have generally received less training on human trafficking than their metropolitan peers (Cole & Sprang, 2014). Members of rural and metropolitan communities who work in social work, law enforcement, school settings, medical offices, law offices and with Indigenous communities are in need of training surrounding human and sex trafficking as they are the ones who work most closely with at-risk youth. Comprehensive training is especially important for those working in child welfare or with homeless youth as those populations are found to be the most at-risk for sex trafficking (Perkins & Ruiz, 2016). Service providers trained in state domestic violence and sexual assault task forces

are more likely to have accurate knowledge on human trafficking (Newton, Mulcahy, & Martin, 2008). The trainings around sex trafficking should address areas including how to identify risk-factors of youth for becoming trafficked, what steps can be taken to prevent trafficking, how to identify youth who are currently being trafficked, how to appropriately intervene with a youth who is being trafficked, how to support youths who have survived trafficking and an understanding of the contemporary state and federal laws surrounding human and sex trafficking. The trainings should occur throughout a professional's career so as to remain current on the relevant literature, policies and procedures and better serve the youth in the community.

3. Community Awareness Education

The role of the community is important in the prevention and intervention of sex trafficking, particularly in rural communities. Informed service providers and professionals in the community can help the public become knowledgeable about the issue of sex trafficking. Collaboration between various community departments and organizations will create greater potential for addressing sex trafficking. Representation at public events, articles in local newspapers and screenings of relevant films, such as *I Am Jane Doe* (Mazzio, 2017) would bring more awareness to the community members. Education for youth awareness is also an important step in reducing the vulnerability of children and preventing sex trafficking (Protect, 2016). Youth prevention programs should be tracked for data on effectiveness. Curriculum in the classroom that helps children understand and identify sex trafficking situations could prove to be valuable in preventing future cases.

4. Culturally Relevant Models of Intervention

Johnson's (2012) note explores how the U.S. modern anti-trafficking efforts have failed Native American victims of sex trafficking. Similarly, the legacy of sexual exploitation and enslavement from the boarding school era, is currently reflected in the lives of Native girls and women who are or were being trafficked and seeing themselves as a part of a sex trade, rather than trafficked (Deer, 2010). Thus, Deer (2010) notes the importance of offering a Native-specific intervention model to develop a culturally appropriate response to sex trafficking on Native women and girls. Koeplinger (2008) similarly notes that culturally based housing and support services for Native victims of trafficking are essential for healing and intervention.

Implications

As human and sex trafficking continues to be explored, the research indicated that every professional, regardless of occupation should be able to identify a victim of sex trafficking. For instance, in a national conference on child trafficking and exploitation in the United States, the presenters suggested that law enforcement training should be improved with the following recommendations: developing culturally and developmentally forensic interviewing strategies and techniques, education on trauma and its impact on children experiencing the justice system and identifying and building resilience through the criminal justice process (Kaufka & Lee, 2010). The research also showed that many of the young women who identified as victims, suffered from trauma and mental health were not being addressed. Future implications resulted in addressing undiagnosed mental health among victims and connecting them to services as soon as

possible in order to start the healing process (Hodge & Lietz, 2007). Public awareness of sex trafficking and mobilization of community members in their local towns can create a movement against sexual exploitation of young girls.

Sex trafficking crimes go unseen especially in rural communities. There are no numbers recorded specific to local sex trafficking in many rural counties, because many sex trafficking crimes are often buried in crimes of prostitution, abuse, sexual assault, abandonment or kidnapping (Walter, 2016). In Northern California, for example the cannabis industry is a main attraction for many young women locally and from different parts of the country in the hope of getting a job in the industry and making money. However, many do not expect to be exploited, raped, asked to work in unsafe conditions, manipulated into exchanging sexual favors in exchange for the money they are owed, along with many other issues that arise in the rural parts of the county (Walter, 2016). Many women are silenced and hesitant to report because they are worried about getting law enforcement involved in an illegal pot grow (CNN, 2017). Burton believes that the legalization of cannabis in the state of California, and a few others will be one angle to combat sex trafficking since the farms will be regulated (2016).

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